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A History of Camp from Christopher Isherwood to the Met Gala

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of camp through a historical account that traces its discourse from the literary work of Christopher Isherwood to the Costume Institute exhibition and benefit held by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2019. The objective of this project is a departure from defining camp since its theorization has been thoroughly pursued by cultural critics for over half a century now. Instead, opting more for a retrospective critique, I am focusing on key figures, works and events that pushed cultural criticism toward a firm understanding of the notion of camp which in turn revitalized dialogue on the concepts of gender, sexuality, as well as taste and identity. With camp being a praxis which is inextricably linked with queer cultural production, its evolution and popularization alongside the increasing momentum of the LGBTQ+ movement is what drives the main argument in the article. In it, I explicate why the Met Gala serves as a turning point in the history of camp and examine the motives that have propelled camp all the way from the queer margins into mainstream media and, furthermore, into the sphere of cultural preservation as its museum status signifies.

Keywords: *camp, queer, LGBTQ+, pop culture, art, performance*

Co-organized with Vogue magazine, the annual fundraising gala of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which every year heralds the commencement of the Costume Institute's fashion exhibit, featured camp as the theme of 2019. With Susan

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Sontag's seminal essay "Notes on Camp" as a point of reference for the exhibition[1] and for the dress code of the evening, celebrities parading the red carpet attempted to interpret camp's essence in looks that conveyed hyperbole, theatricality, opulence, as well as incongruousness and grotesqueness.[2] As is always the case with the Gala's pre-dinner event, the red carpet becomes a live spectacle for the Manhattan audience and is also livestreamed, twitted, and Insta-storied across the globe. This year's theme saw Lady Gaga in over-the-top eyelashes serving poses while alternating costumes; Katy Perry donning a cumbersome crystal chandelier outfit; and Jared Leto draped in a red gown and carrying a bust of his own decapitated head. Among the noteworthy appearances, actress/screenwriter Lena Waithe walked down the carpet in a suit, the stripes of which were formed out of lyrics from songs popular within the black LGBTQ+ community, while the suit's buttons pictured the performers of these songs, including Gloria Gaynor, Sylvester, and RuPaul, to mention just a few. More importantly, Waithe's outfit had a large message stitched on the back which read "Black Drag Queens Invented Camp," making thus a political statement with regard to camp's origins (Gonzales 2019). Moving from the red carpet show to the highly exclusive dinner party, the interior of the museum was aptly decorated, featuring gigantic pink flamingoes, while the dinner performance was headlined by Cher and continued with a voguing showcase by well-known dancers from the ballroom scene. The footage saturating online social platforms not only demonstrated the extravagance of the evening, which was amplified with camp's playful twists, but also effectively captivated the sense of exclusivity highlighted by the privateness of the event itself as well as the very semiotic nature of camp, the decipherability of which remains fully accessible only to its cognoscenti.

[1] For a virtual tour along with commentary on the exhibition, see the official webpage of the museum: https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/camp-notes-on-fashion.

[2] The "Camp: Notes on Fashion" exhibition, which ran from May 9, 2019 through September 8, 2019, provided a retrospective history of camp from the 17th century onwards, including items of art, clothing, and decoration, as well as a series of quotes by camp critics accompanying the installations. The exhibition and its inaugural gala held on May 6, 2019 were orchestrated around Sontag's essay, which, according to curator in charge Andrew Bolton, felt timely and culturally resonant (Bowles 2019).

Camp at the Met Ball marks a historic moment, one that is socially, culturally, and politically layered. Regarded as one of America's most expensive and prestigious social events, the Gala not only boasts a considerable fundraising market, but also serves as commercial fodder and media magnet for the fashion and advertisement industries (Friedman 2018). Gala themes are arguably important in the sense that since they are the focal point of the exhibition and are expected to attract audience and fundraising interest, they need to fulfill some sort of narrative purpose or demonstrate contemporaneity. In the past, themes of the costume exhibition referenced among other things, Catholic imagination, Cubism, and the Belle Époque, as well as paid homage to designers and icons, including Yves Saint Laurent, Alexander McQueen, and Jacqueline Kennedy. In 2019, the decision of the museum's Costume Institute department to curate an exhibition based on camp, an otherwise questionable form of aestheticism that consciously celebrates the banal art of trash, kitsch, and risqué humor, as well as largely denoting a queer sensibility, prompts an interesting query as to how its peculiar history has evolved so far and, more importantly, how it managed to cross the eclectic threshold of an elite institution like New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art. Furthermore, envisioning camp—a previously marginal form of art and praxis shared by and almost exclusively performed within a close(ted) circle of queer people—in the widely publicized sphere of the Met Gala and its overall cultural context requires a retrospective examination.

A Scholarship of Camp

In order to comprehend camp's transition from marginality to the mainstream markets of media and fashion, it is imperative to note that camp's history as a culturally specific subject matter owes much to the scholarly effort made to approach, define, and document it. While the earliest and most comprehensive attempt to annotate camp is largely credited to Susan Sontag, Christopher Isherwood had earlier attempted a rudimentary, unofficial

definition in his novel *The World in the Evening* (1954). In the novel, Isherwood directly relates camp with queer culture; Charles, an openly queer character, explains the notion of camp to Steven, the novel's closeted queer protagonist who draws direct autobiographical references from the writer himself. Charles confesses to Stephen that he is having trouble with his partner, Bob, because the latter's Quaker background seems to have infiltrated their relationship. Charles description of Quaker culture points out "their lack of style," their inability "to do things with air," and their hopeless tackiness (110). He then asks Stephen if he has ever heard of the word "camp," and the latter replies having heard of it being used in bars (110). From that very moment, the essence of camp comes across as clandestine, being limited to the queer bar context, a place that traditionally served as shelter for queer expression as well as cultural formation. The shift in Charles's tone from confessional to explanatory henceforth marks the revelation of a secret knowledge to be shared and taught from one queer man to another, an indoctrination which Isherwood discloses to his readers. Through Charles, Isherwood divides camp between Low and High: namely, "a swishy little boy with peroxided hair, dressed in a picture hat and a feather boa, pretending to be Marlene Dietrich" (what is called camping in queer circles, he adds), and "the whole emotional basis of the ballet, for example, and of course of baroque art," respectively (110). In those few lines, the writer manages to coherently illustrate the essence of camp, which now serves as a starting point for studying the extensive literature on/of it.

Almost a decade after Isherwood's novel made its appearance, Sontag published *Against Interpretation*, a collection of essays on art, philosophy, literature, and photography, among other topics, which also included the infamous "Notes on 'Camp.'" With "Notes" Sontag established herself as the first critic to undertake the task of defining camp. The essay consists of a total of fifty-eight notes through which the writer explicates what camp is, how and where to identify it, and what underlies its praxis. Sontag's work, as the first to have put

the subject matter of camp into academic discourse, attracted critical attention and generated strands of debate among camp critics. In one of the notes, the writer evaluated camp sensibility as "disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical" (276), which led the 1990s school of camp critics (with Moe Meyer, Pamela Robertson, and Fabio Cleto among the leading figures) to argue against its apolitical character and ultimately recuperate camp as a postmodern critical tool forged with deconstructive qualities. Another problematic aspect behind "Notes" was that its case study and the overall referential pool it drew from prefigured and legitimized to a large extent a white Euro-American culture and, specifically, a white Euro-American gay male culture as the official parent culture of camp's production and reception.[3] Despite the fact that parts of it have raised questions (and eyebrows), Sontag's work remains a landmark piece in the history of camp, a sort of camp Bible that has withstood the test of time and proved to be an inexhaustible source of citation and debate. The fact that the essay comes in the form of notes has also greatly contributed to its popularity with academic and non-academic readership alike; it is a guidebook, after all, that enumerates in simple and practical terms what constitutes camp and what its principle concepts are. Apparently, when the Met's Costume Institute decided to reference Sontag's work as the fundamental text behind their proposition of camp as the key theme of the exhibition and the gala, they basically encouraged its usage as a manual to follow.

Camp has for years evaded a solid interpretation and definition. This is another reason why initial efforts to pinpoint its character come in the form of listing, notes, and micro-definitions, in the manner of Sontag's essay. Works from Mark Booth, Philip Core, Andre Britton, and Jack Babuscio abide by this rule.[4] Their essays follow Sontag's annotation style

[3] As is made apparent further on in this article, this notion has been challenged ever since, yet it has managed to set the basis for a concrete understanding of camp as this has appeared in literature, architecture, art, and other creative domains, where white gay men have had access to and exerted their cultural influence.

[4] For further analysis, see Philip Core's *Camp: The Lie that Tells the Truth*. Plexus, 1984; Andrew Britton's "For Interpretation: Notes against Camp," *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*,

(not in the strict sense, however) and offer insights into past and existing camp culture. Aside from Babuscio's essay which pays attention to camp in a film context, there had not been a solid theorization in general. As Isherwood's Charles ironically puts it, "[camp is] terribly hard to define. You have to actually meditate on it and feel it intuitively, like Laotse's *Tao*. Once you've done that, you'll find yourself wanting to use the word whenever you discuss aesthetics or philosophy or almost anything. I never can understand how critics manage to do without it" (111). Likewise, post-Sontag critics literally read through the camp lens and tried to apply the term widely and in detail. Indeed, the scholars' work expanded Sontag's examples and tokens, aiding in data accumulation regarding the praxis of camp and helping map out a vast culture connected to it. In a similar vein, Richard Dyer and his article "It's Being so Camp as Keeps Us Going" (1976), which originally appeared in the erotic magazine *Playguy*, relied on the work of Sontag to provide his own definition and views on camp and, additionally, offered his own list and photographic material of camp icons, including the Queen Mother, John Wayne, and the titillating art of Tom of Finland.[5] What is more, Dyer was one of the earliest critics to perceive camp out of its white culture context, as his list includes the icons of Little Richard and Sylvester, two African American performers whose flamboyant stage presence granted them the camp status. What is interesting to observe here is that post-Sontag criticism on camp is heavily male-centered. One may as well argue that the aforementioned scholars, who operate from a gay studies perspective, only seemed to perpetuate camp as a gay sensibility, an inside joke to be understood by the queer few. However, due to their deep understanding of camp's mechanisms and expressions, these scholars were also responsible for thoroughly documenting and making available a camp

edited by Fabio Cleto, U of Michigan P, 1999, pp. 136-142; and Jack Babuscio's "The Cinema of Camp (*aka* Camp and the Gay Sensibility)," Cleto, pp. 117-135.

[5] See Richard Dyer's "It's Been So Camp as Keeps Us Going," Cleto, pp 110-116.

canon which, to this day, remains essential not only within camp readership, but also for queer studies in general.

A Subcultural Legacy

Being an unconventional mode of expression, camp was sought after in the low forms of art and, of course, the queer margins. The postmodern sway in the arts witnessed the implosion of grand narratives and favored views of a fragmented self and a highly ironic world. The case of Andy Warhol is indicative here as he went on to challenge modernity itself by creating art in the most glamorously mundane ways—indeed a paradox in its own being—shifting focus on the artifice of reality. Within this context and among other similar endeavors, Warhol created his film *Camp* in 1965, a production of his own Factory wherein collaborators, Warhol muses/superstars, and friends of the artist approach the idea of "camping" through performance, in a campified version of a TV variety show. In an ad appearing in *The Village Voice* prior to the film's screening, Warhol referred to it being technically terrible, but filled with "fantastic people."[6]The film's ad declaration practically recapitulates the idea of camp. Warhol's plastic universe of faux art, transvestites, muscle models, and Manhattan socialites is reflective of the banality of life as perceived by the artist and as enclosed in the art of camp itself. In the words of Sontag, taken from "Against Interpretation," "a great deal of today's art may be understood as motivated by a flight from interpretation. To avoid interpretation, art may become parody. Or it may become abstract. Or it may become ('merely') decorative. Or it may become non-art" (10). Camp praxis is precisely that flight from interpretation; its absurdity is a bizarre assault on the rationality behind any intelligible approach. Warhol and other contemporaries, such as Roy Lichtenstein, Diane Arbus, and Bob Mizer, to mention just a few, produced explicitly camp works that not

[6] The ad in question can be found at the following link: https://warholfilmads.files.wordpress.com/2012/11/vv-jan-6-1966-warhol.jpg

only reflected their approach to traditional perceptions of art, but, more significantly, promoted a marginally queer culture whose art imitated their life (which imitated art).

Approaching and documenting camp in its spheres of cultural production and reception has been fundamental for understanding the subject. Among the noteworthy documentations is Esther Newton's work on *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (1972), a close study of drag culture in the 1960s, which has been of the utmost importance within drag and camp studies because of its anthropological merit. Newton's ethnography of drag addressed an academic and middle-class readership that was most likely unfamiliar with the queer praxis of camp. Included in her work are interviews with female impersonators who were keen on sharing knowledge on the dramatics of drag as well as on their social environment. The writer applied a critical reading of the material collected, clarifying ambiguities concerned with the nature of drag along with deconstructing traditional views on the issue of homosexual subject. Regarding camp, Newton drew a rigid connection of the praxis with gay male culture, arguing that "[t]he ubiquity of the camp role and style in most homosexual social groups, regardless of the status position of the group, is one of the most striking features of homosexual culture. As camp style represents all that is most unique in the homosexual subculture, *the* camp is the cultural and social focus of the majority of male homosexual groups" (56). This assumption derives from the fact that very few queer women had access to the drag queen circles and could not equally partake in the production of camp. In fact, earlier in her work, Newton clarifies that "[t]he males considered as a group have a much more elaborate subculture and contribute disproportionally to distinctively homosexual concepts, styles, and terminology" (27). As such, camp in *Mother Camp* is established as inextricably tied to queer men, a fact that the study perpetuates by having barely touched upon lesbian styles and sensibility. What is important, however, is that in Newton's work, drag and camp, by extension, emerge as those cultural praxes that are

energized to their core with the theatrics of gender, thus becoming one of the crucially practical domains whereupon gender performativity can be examined—as proved later on with the advent of queer theory and its case subjects that relied on drag performances.[7]

Apart from the drag bars, camp has vividly manifested itself in a rather unique and culturally significant queer phenomenon, that of balls. Pageant-like in their conception, balls are social events that favor drag transformations, performance showcases, and dance battles—most popularly known in the style of voguing. Ballroom culture in America is traced back to the nineteenth century when the events were commonly referred to as masquerades and were usually performed within the African American and Latinx communities.[8] Progressively they took the form of competitions between queer enclaves, named Houses, whose familial structures resembled a queer distortion of the actual institution of family (run by a Mother, a Father, and children) and whose names often paid direct reference and homage to fashion houses, like Dior, Yves Saint Laurent, and Prada, to name just a few. Houses participating in a ball compete for prizes in specific categories inspired from everyday life, popular icons, the catwalk, or queer culture itself.[9] Vogue, as the primary dancing style of balls and configured out of the eponymous fashion magazine, is a choreographic form that is executed by strutting, posing, and rapid arm movement that accentuates the dancer's poses. The theatricality and attitude exhibited in the dance form are indicative of its camp aesthetic and, combined with that, the referential pools the ball categories draw from add to a cultural praxis that is undergirded with camp poetics in every manner. Most importantly, being a cultural act that sprouted from marginal communities of color and generated praxes that are racially and ethnically inflected, voguing and the

[7] See Judith Butler's analysis of gender performativity through drag performances in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990, and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* Routledge, 1993.
[8] See George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, Basic Books, 1994, for more on the history of the masquerades.
[9] For more on the categories and the history and structure of the Houses, see Marlon Bailey's *Butch Queens up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, U of Michigan P, 2013.

ballroom attest to a history of camp of color that exists in parallel with that created by white queer men. Though viewed within the queer frame, all communities developed and practiced their camp praxis at the margins of society. The doubly marginal position of communities of color, however, pushed them to create a unique form of camp that not only parodies heteronormative reality, but also assaults narratives and conventions of white culture, while simultaneously celebrating racial/ethnic pride.

Rich in cultural content, balls have time and again been the case study of anthropology as well as a fundamental source of citation both for popular culture and queer culture itself. Due to that, camp as a subcultural mode of expression and a performative praxis that convolutes the ideological nature of gender (and, by extension, race and ethnicity), not only allowed cultural critics to delve deeper into its mechanisms, but also gradually became more visible to a mainstream audience. Jennie Livingston's seminal documentary *Paris is Burning* (1990), for that matter, captivated ballroom life and the queer art of vogue in its domestic environment. Its critical approach to the House structure as well as the explication of the voguing styles and competing categories with regard to role-playing attracted scholarly interest, with Judith Butler (1993) and bell hooks (1992) among its critics, and thus served as a fecund ground for theories on gender performativity and race to be further corroborated. At the same time, the docudramatic character of Livingston's work, which focused on individual narratives of the struggling New York ball communities, resonated with viewers in the sense that it framed the lives within the balls as tragic and glamorous at the same time. In the course of time, *Paris is Burning* has acquired a solid status within gender and LGBTQ+ studies, proving itself to be an insightful primary material as well as a historical ethnography of American queer culture. Moreover, it became the inspirational backdrop against which queer productions currently enjoying a limelight have patterned themselves. Some cases in point are reality contest series *RuPaul's Drag Race*

(2009-), which has progressively become a successful crossover hit, while FX social drama series *Pose* (2018-), which presents Manhattan ballroom life in the late 1980s and early 1990s,[10] is currently gaining momentum.[11]

Camp in Pop Culture

Popular culture has indeed been a vehicle that propelled camp into the mainstream; a sort of host of camp (re)production and dissemination. For one thing, one cannot clearly mark a specific moment in time when camp started infiltrating pop culture. In fact, most of the icons, fashions, or styles celebrated by camp have originated in pop culture itself. As Mark Booth argues, "although pop has served to jazz up and help popularise camp, it did no more than that, for camp is a much older (by some 300 years) and bigger phenomenon, taking in aspects of High Culture as well as popular performance" (74). The case of Hollywood divas, such as Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, or Joan Crawford, occupied the popular imagination prior to becoming a camp obsession for queer men. Conversely, camp- and queer-specific praxes like voguing, camp icons like Divine and Amanda Lepore or the camp art of director John Waters gradually entered American pop culture. Of course, there are also those domains, like musical theater and couture fashion, where camp and pop overlap, sometimes to an indistinguishable degree, proving thus that camp and pop to feed each other and are at times symbiotic. Camp theorists, especially from the late 1990s onwards (Robertson 1996; Hawkins 2004/2016; Shugart and Waggoner 2008; Horn 2017), have undertaken analyses on

[10] Interestingly, Jennie Livingston herself served as a primary director for the seventh episode of the series' second season.

[11] Not only do both series pay homage to queer culture, but also they utilize and popularize camp's arsenal as this is manifested in discourse, performance, and aesthetics. Among these usages are camp talk with excessively stylized vocabulary and slang terminology, flamboyant mannerisms, and femme performances, as well as comic and high camp interpretations of fashion. As regards camp practices, those of "reading" and "shade-throwing," namely an opponent's verbal humiliation with the utilization of risqué humor and virulent lines, are very popular between queens. See more on the camp practices in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies,* edited by Philip Auslanderk, Routledge, 2003, pp. 173-198.

past and present popular culture products, from series and films to music videos and icons, a fact that demonstrates camp's ubiquity in pop and an indefatigable interest to scrutinize it.

Obviously, the influx of camp imagery into today's pop culture raises questions as regards taste and market appeal. With camp bringing into pop its over-the-top qualities, including gender theatricality and aesthetic hyperbole, it should be ascertained that the latter is accordingly morphed into a domain of creative expression that favors artifice, frivolity, and irony. Simultaneously, the division between pop's already superficial character and camp's adoration for stylization is becoming interchangeable and, by extension, harder to discern. The domain of pop music is indicative as numerous early MTV pop divas, such as Madonna, Cindy Lauper, and Annie Lennox, forged their musical identities and iconography with campy looks and flamboyant visuals, creating parodied versions of traditional femininity through their pop/camp projects and challenging strict dichotomies between high and low, political and apolitical, gay and straight. Coupled with the abovementioned qualities are also cultural markers or narratives of queerness inscribed into camp's lexicon that are transferred into pop. Freddie Mercury's vacuuming in 1950s housewife drag while sporting a gay-clone moustache on Queen's "I Want to Break Free" (1984) music video, or the Pet Shop Boys' appearing amidst images of a black Lady Liberty and marching muscle men, urging their audiences to "go west" in the namesake 1993cover of the Village People 1970s gay anthem, are among those instances when pop, imbued with the valence of camp, brought queer culture and the queer subject, in particular, center stage. As a result, pop culture, becoming the channel of those queer codes, arguably aids in the dissemination of camp into a wider consumer audience—assuming, of course, that camp's own audience comprises a very specific group of people familiar with its queer tropes and semiotics. A plethora of music audiences indulging in Mercury's flamboyance and Madonna's vogue trend, or, in more recent cases, Lady Gaga and Beyoncé's pseudo-lesbian romance for the music video of

"Telephone" (2010) and Sam Smith's dramatic delivery in "How Do You Sleep?" (2019) are initiated into a camp culture that has found its way out of the queer margins into mainstream culture.[12]

Though this popularization of camp can as well be deemed a cooptation of queer praxis by the industry of pop—similarly with other culturally unique expressions, including punk or hip-hop culture—the truth is that a two-way process is at work here. First of all, from the very beginnings of its sociopolitical solidification, the LGBTQ+ community has sought avenues that would drive queer culture into a more visible and audible position. Visibility, in fact, has been a much-cherished value that American queer culture, in particular, has carefully and forcefully weaved into its ideological narratives of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. "We're here and we're queer" or "out and proud," the quintessential mantras of the LGBTQ+ rights movement, have essentially sanctioned most, if not all. Attempts to join forces with mainstream culture, become socially, financially, and legally acknowledged, and find their seat at North America's cultural table. Despite its often vulgar and frowned-upon sense of taste or bizarrely queer appreciation of reality, camp has nonetheless been a praxis deriving from queer culture and would sooner or later be promoted alongside other aspects of the culture; as such, it has by and large been offered up for wide consumption.[13] The camp praxis of vogue and its seeming appropriation by Madonna and other figureheads of the showbiz industry is exemplary of that, not only because of the self-telling narrative of

[12] As a matter of fact, pop music has been an important outlet for camp expression primarily because of its ability to allow performers to create and alternate between personas, utilizing the poetics of spectacle. As a result, this intersection of pop music and camp has frequently been the object of analysis. For further analysis, see specifically Sheila Whiteley's *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity*, Routledge, 2000; J. Halberstam's "Queer Voices and Musical Genders," *Oh! Boy. Masculinities and Popular Music*, edited by Freya Jarma-Ivens, Routledge, 2007, pp. 183-196; Katrin Horn's *Women, Camp, and Popular Culture: Serious Excess*,' Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Stan Hawkins's *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*. Routledge, 2016; and my dissertation *Strut, Sing, Slay: Diva Camp Praxis and Queer Audiences in the Arena Tour Spectacle*, doctoral dissertation, 2019, http://ikee.lib.auth.gr/record/305694.

[13] As Daniel Harris argues, "[t]he selling of gay culture was a synergistic arrangement, a marriage of convenience, a profitable intersection of interests, one that, far from resisting, homosexuals have fought long and hard to bring about, doing everything possible to make themselves more appealing in the eyes of advertisers" (6).

cooptation by the pop industry, but also because of the eagerness of the queer community to valorize and capitalize on their praxis. Therefore, it is misleading to assume that popular culture simply plunders subcultural praxes to refresh and boost a market of trends or expand the consumer audience radius, when in fact those praxes are also, more often not, promoted the other way round.

From its origins, camp has been a coded practice that facilitated communication among its partakers. Closeted gay men would utilize the camp lexicon as a form of bonding or to take secret/guilty pleasure in an arcane camp culture. More importantly, those who had access to creative positions, namely any domain connected with cultural production, from the visual and performing arts to fashion and architecture, would often use these as outlets of expressivity, thus imbuing them with the distinct queer cultural markers.[14] With the advent of the LGBTQ+ movement, the queer community began to claim a cultural presence by putting their culture "out there" for non-queer people to see.[15] Their gaining cultural influence came in concert with acquiring financial strength, credentials, and the opportunity to channel their art and sensibility into the sphere of mainstream culture. Camp, though, has a very peculiar set of codes that, first of all, are not easily transmittable to audiences unaware of its double entendres, and are, moreover, governed by the logic of cynicism and often a crude approach of established conventions. One can only think of the drag pageant culture and its overindulgence in brutal humor, the vulgarity of the verbal exchanges, not to mention its attack against heterosexual culture. It becomes apparent that selling, both literally and figuratively, camp culture to a mainstream audience, the referential field of which might

[14] The reason why musical theater, for instance, emphasizes the camp factor and is, perhaps stereotypically, renowned for its appeal to gay audiences is precisely because production-wise it is also populated by queer people. For more, see John Clum's work in *Something for the Boys: Musical Theater and Gay Culture*, Palgrave, 1999.

[15] See more on cultural enfranchisement and the LGBTQ+ movement in Alexandra Chasin's *Selling Out: The Gay and Lesbian Movement Goes to Market*, St. Martin's P, 2000.

usually stretch beyond the receptive and perceptive limits imposed by heterodominant culture, is a challenge in itself, at least in terms of pop market economy.

Searching for Camp's Subversive Valence

Bringing camp out of its cultural closet also means that the interior of that closet is exposed. Therefore, what comes along with this popularization of camp is the actual queer subject itself. In the public mind, queerness has come to connote sexual deviance which, often seen as threatening to the established grammar of gender, has either been met with backlash (usually in the form of ridiculing and violence) or has been forced to exist marginally. With camp strongly foregrounding this deviance, especially through the prism of male queerness which practically sabotages the ideological basis of masculinity, it is well-understood why gay culture has kept camp to its inner circles for quite long. Also, the fact that camp denotes effeminacy, sometimes at its most debased form of caricature, has been strongly opposed not only by straight mainstream culture, but by queer culture itself. Identifying with the cult(ure) of camp comes with the risk of stigmatization and, with the queer male subject always carrying the sociocultural burden of an incompetent masculinity, being associated with camp basically engenders backlash. It is not coincidental that campy homosexual men appearing in popular culture have often been treated as insignificant, frivolous and, importantly, non-erotic.[16] The gay liberation movement itself is also a demonstration of this inner conflict as the rebellious youth of this movement wished to tone down aspects of queerness and dissociate themselves with the past culture of "fairies," musicals, and Hollywood divas—namely, camp per se (Halperin 69-71). As a matter of fact, camp's history is one of stereotyping that abounds with hysteric queens and flamboyant

[16] See more on Larry Gross's work on "Out of the Mainstream: Sexual Minorities and the Mass Media," *Gay People, Sex and the Media*, edited by Michelle A. Wolf and Alfred P. Kielwasser, Harrington Park P, 1991, pp. 19-46, and the seminal work of Vito Russo in *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, Harper Row, 1987.

outfits, not to mention a treatment of femininity that is, at best, sensational and borderline misogynist.

As much as camp encloses a degree of social stigma in its kernel, it is also a practice that is unapologetically gay. Camp and the camp subject have never been about the art of subtlety; precisely because of their hyperbole and extravagance, their nature is all too conspicuous to ignore. Its sassy framing of queerness indeed renders it a flaunting device in queer culture's arsenal of assertive identities, ultimately making camp a political weapon against the heterodominant paradigm. Reclaiming camp as a queer practice would emerge at a time when the queer community was coming out of the closet with a vengeance, proving that camp was not a passive viewing of the world through high decorativism and diva dramas, but an active opposition led by gender outcasts against their marginalization. Establishing a clearer connection between camp and queer, Moe Meyer saw camp "as the total body of performative practices and strategies used to enact a queer identity, with enactment defined as social visibility" (5). Corroborating that, Fabio Cleto underlines that queer in camp appears as "all too gendered, all too raced, all too specific, *while claiming* to include that otherness which nevertheless excludes" (18). However, the critic goes on to argue that tracing a queer subject behind camp risks essentializing it as a distinctly homosexual practice, stabilizing it into fixity, when in fact both camp and queer work toward puzzling and unsettling established categories of gender and sexuality (18-19). Under this premise, camp's essentialization risks precluding all the non-queer subjects that partook in its cultural formation, including heterosexual women and men, as the cases of straight Hollywood divas and producers of musicals demonstrate. Here we might argue that camp is a praxis that becomes queer in the sense that it challenges the heteronormative gender binary, but this should not necessarily foreground a homosexual subject any more than a heterosexual one. The culture of faux drag and burlesque, for that matter, has seen many heterosexual women

camping up the ideological concept of femininity by inflating it into a glamorous play and thus reducing its narrative seriousness into costumes and wigs, revealing its performable, constructed character.[17]

Camp's attack on heteronormative culture should be seen as a reaction to the suppression of alternative gendered and sexual expression. By this logic, one might often slip into the aforementioned essentialism and assume that it is not only queer people who oppose the concept of heteronormativity, thus immediately associating camp production and reception with the queer subject, when in fact heterosexual people might also feel unease with heteronormative reality and its sociocultural expectations. What should not go unnoticed, however, is that camp resonates with(in) queer culture not only because of its origins, but rather because these origins point to camp's emergence as a necessity for the queer subject to react against a reality that cast it out; hence, a living of camp as an embodied experience. Revisiting the Met Gala and taking it as a case in point, one should be cautious as to how camp enters the vocabulary of high culture and celebrity culture since this may point to cultural appropriation, especially when stripped off of cultural content and done so for the pure sake of publicity. Celebrities adopting the concept of camp for the purposes of performance or persona structure—or in the gala's case, for a red carpet stunt—might often result in brushing off camp's deeply queer nuances and thus risk mitigating its potentially subversive edge, as in cases like these the cultural context tends to evaporate. Nonetheless (and Gala aside), the Met's "Camp: Notes on Fashion" curatorial project does do justice on camp by meticulously annotating its queer origins and paying homage to the people that shaped its aesthetics. Looking at camp's conservatorship at the Met through the lens of the

[17] Faux queens (also known as bio queens) are heterosexual women adopting the stylistic and expressive lexicon of drag queens; see more on Harrington's work *Traversing Gender: Understanding Transgender Realities*, Mystic Productions, 2016. Regarding burlesque and the parody of gender, consider Claire Nally's article on "Grrrly, Hurly, Burly: Neo-Burlesque and the Performance of Gender," *Textual Practice, vol. 23, no. 4*, 2009, pp. 621-623. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09502360903000554.

museum's own institutional power to preserve and always contextualize art, camp is seen as a cultural artifact the museum status of which encourages its acknowledgement and veneration by the public.

As a topic of cultural interest and study, camp's intricate nature continues to amaze and perplex its critics and audience. Its provocative takes on reality, gender, and art cultivate a love-and-hate appreciation of it. Queer culture's relationship with camp is in fact demonstrative of that. One can see, for example, how queer men may indulge in the culture of camp as this becomes manifest in the adoration of music divas of camp, such as Kylie Minogue and Katy Perry, or in popular shows, like *RuPaul's Drag Race*. At the same time, however, a part of queer men legitimize and worship narratives of masculinity that have been notoriously hostile against camp expressions of homosexuality. In short, gay male culture may often perpetuate discrimination against effeminate men precisely because of the erotics of masculinity that stand in contrast with camp's flamboyant expression of gender.[18]Camp and masculinity have always worked antagonistically, or at times complementarily, but rarely with each other (Halperin 201-220). With this dichotomy being reflective of the gender binary—as dictated by the rules of heteronormativity—cultural criticism on camp ought to always pay close attention not only to the culture of camp, but also to the one(s) surrounding it.

Indeed, camp's embodying all these paradoxes, and still being celebrated among the queer community, is what is ultimately bizarre about it and, of course, one of the reasons why it still stimulates scholarly interest, and will continue to do so in the future. Not surprising,

[18] This can, in fact, become more evident in gay media and dating apps. Albeit populated with masculine role-models, the gay press and online magazines, including *Attitude*, *Gay Times*, *The Advocate* and *Out*, have progressively moved from the masculine/-ist ideal of the Western typically white male and his objectification, and have become more inclusive of non-standardized perceptions of gender expression, thus offering liberating looks into gay masculinity. Dating apps, however, which to a large extent rely on the factor of sexual attraction, seem to perpetuate traditional masculinity, and their users, especially those who wish to disavow gay culture and its queerer manifestations altogether, may at times become ignorant, insensitive, or even hostile to effeminate expressions of other queer men.

thus, is the fact that the study of camp has not ceased generating refreshing approaches, proving its ever-intriguing nature. As a matter of fact, critics of camp have expanded on the existing literature on camp, applying cross-readings of it with strands of cultural theory concerned with race, ethnicity, class, as well as extending into case studies well beyond the Anglophone canon.[19] With an artistic legacy traced as early as the seventeenth century and with a solid history of critical theorization covering over half a century, the study of camp has never been more concrete and relevant than it is now. By examining camp's motion into the mainstream, a historical trajectory is revealed. If camp is taken to be a metonymy of queer culture, one eventually witnesses the ways through which the culture has exited the closet, how it addresses its camp legacy, and, ultimately, how it has been shaped by it. Curiously so, as the Met project indicates, the art that has so sassily objected to what is canonical and classic, now seems to be turning classic itself—perhaps even an -ism. The future critics of camp, therefore, should concern themselves not only with what defines camp and all those items, styles, icons and sensibilities being or appearing camp, but basically with the ways in which culture is formulated through and around camp and, most importantly, whether and why camp remains a critical cultural device that deserves analytic merit.

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[19] Over the last three years, there has been a proliferate interest in the subject matter of camp that has significantly updated bibliography and readership. Consider Horn's work on the women of camp (2017), and the edited anthologies *Notes on the Uses of Black Camp*, edited by Anna Pochmara and Justyna Wierzchowska, De Gruyter Open, 2017, as well as *The Dark Side of Camp Aesthetics: Queer Economies of Dirt, Dust and Patina*, edited by Ingrid Hotz-Davies, Georg Vogt, and Franziska Bergmann, Routledge, 2008.

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